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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [CU](#)  
SUBJECT: CUBA: CIVIL SOCIETY FULLY IN FAVOR OF IMPROVING  
U.S.-CUBA TIES

REF: A. HAVANA 592 ("GOC SIGNALS +READINESS TO MOVE  
FORWARD,")  
[1](#)B. HAVANA 629 ("BLOGGER SPOILING FOR A FIGHT WITH  
THE AUTHORITIES")  
[1](#)C. HAVANA 684 ("BLOGGERS BEATEN BUT NOT DETERRED")  
[1](#)D. HAVANA 660 ("CUBAN INFORMATION BLOCKADE")  
[1](#)E. HAVANA 704 ("CUBA UNLEASHES MOB ON BLOGGERS")

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. There is widespread consensus among Cuban civil society that improving relations between the United States and the GOC will strengthen the cause of freedom in Cuba. While skeptical that the GOC is capable of leading the process, civil society leaders urged U.S. policy makers to look beyond GOC policy for evidence of improvements in the human rights situation on the island. End Summary.

CIVIL SOCIETY FULLY IN FAVOR OF IMPROVING RELATIONS  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Civil society leaders in Cuba are nearly unanimous in their positive appraisals of the recent efforts by Washington to improve relations with the GOC through direct talks on issues of mutual concern and the easing of restrictions on travel, remittances, and trade. Leaders hope that this process will continue and broaden, and that it might lead to greater government-to-government engagement on other issues. They particularly praise the ability of the United States to seek greater relations without sacrificing its human rights agenda or contacts (Ref A). This report is based on a series of September to December 2009 meetings in Havana with a wide variety of civil society leaders.

BETTER TIES WILL ADVANCE REFORM  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) Opposition leaders believe that closer government-to-government relations will shore up reformers in the GOC, currently stymied by the top-heavy leadership. Increased working-level contacts now may provide the foundation for stronger relations in the future as the top

GOC leadership changes over time. Further, many contacts have noted that the GOC actively employs Cuba-U.S. hostilities as a scapegoat for everything from economic woes to social unrest. They hope that improved relations will weaken this excuse and hasten change by further exposing the regime's failures. "Whatever you do, don't make the mistake of giving them a pretext to reverse what is happening," a dissident economist warned us.

¶4. (SBU) Many civil society leaders also urge a faster and broader approach to increasing links between the two countries. The bulk of civil society leaders support allowing unfettered travel to and from the United States and, although the majority supports unilaterally lifting the embargo, they also understand that it is a significant point of leverage. In general, they applauded the administration for asking the GOC to take the next steps to show that it is serious about improving conditions for its people and mending relations with the U.S.

#### PATIENCE IN THE RANKS, RESULTS WON'T COME OVERNIGHT

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¶5. (SBU) In spite of their positive assessments, most civil society leaders do not expect significant improvements in Cuba over the short-term. They lament that little has changed since the transition from Fidel to Raul Castro, and they point to the endurance of government institutions like the military and the Communist Party, and their ability to preserve the status quo even after the inevitable changes that nature will force at the top. Still, they maintain optimism that the work of Cuban activists, together with a U.S. strategy of engagement with the GOC, in addition to continued support of civil society, may produce results in

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the mid-to-long term. As one civil society leader noted: "Fast change usually means violent change. We are working for non-violent change. This means we have to take a long view of our work."

#### LOOK FOR SIGNS OF CHANGE OUTSIDE THE GOC

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¶6. (SBU) In addition, several opposition leaders have cautioned against only looking for evidence of positive change in government policy, with one well-regarded dissident stating flatly that "this government is incapable of responding" to Washington's calls for changes in the human rights arena. They point instead to efforts by diverse civil society groups to get away with social activism and expanded expression of ideas. Groups that have not traditionally embraced politics, such as bloggers, cultural performers, academics, religious and ethnic leaders and journalists, they claim, are being increasingly successful in expanding the space for freedom of expression. "These are the third rails, the most vibrant sectors of society right now," a former publisher and editor told us.

#### BLOGGERS ON THEIR WAY ALREADY

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¶7. (SBU) Many civil society leaders point out that bloggers have successfully created from scratch a public forum to carry out unheard-of discussions and government criticism, in spite of GOC displeasure and significant limits on Internet use on the island. When asked about why the GOC allows the bloggers to carry on, one contact noted: "They do not allow us this space, we have taken it." In spite of setbacks (Ref C), the blogger community has continued to push the boundaries of free expression in this new arena and, in doing so, encouraged others to speak out.

#### NEW VOICES SPEAKING OUT

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18. (SBU) In addition to the bloggers, artists, musicians, journalists and academics have also begun to speak more openly about their frustrations with the current status quo. Some of Cuba's most famous actors and performers have come out openly over the last three months with criticism against GOC restrictions, particularly on access to information. Even official newspapers have started allowing more pointed criticism of the government -- and the journalist whose October column was deemed too critical to publish (Ref D) continues to rail against government bureaucracy. The Catholic Church too gets away with not-too-subtle criticism in homilies and publications.

COMMENT: UNPRECEDENTED CONSENSUS,  
UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY  
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19. (SBU) Cuba's notoriously fractured civil society is united in support of better U.S.-Cuba relations, and cautiously optimistic about the future. It's not so much that they expect the GOC to change its ways, as much as it is their belief that U.S. rapprochement will erode further the legitimacy of the GOC while strengthening the hand of those who support change inside and outside the regime. "The (Cuban) government was not ready for (President) Obama," an Afro-Cuban leader told us, "it has no idea what to do." Cuban civil society members seem confident that, despite setbacks, they will succeed in continuing to carve out public spaces for free expression in the face of ongoing repression at the hands of the government.  
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